

disrupting the gendered form



A MANIFESTO



of conferences

TRADITIONAL

ACADEMIC

CONFERENCES

SUCK!

A MANIFESTO

Because conferences are meant to be spaces where we generate new ideas and make connections but how are we meant to do that when they can be....

Inaccessible

Alienating

Intimidating

Exhausting

Expensive & Time-consuming

Unsupportive

Because it is difficult to embrace the vulnerability needed for connection when we feel like we aren't

good enough,

smart enough,

clear enough,

professional enough,

just enough



Because we are forced to be performative, staunch, defensive, unambiguous in our ideas to combat the uncertainty and unsafety of academic spaces

(when it should be the opposite)

Because sometimes we leave conferences feeling

EMBARRASSED EXHAUSTED

DISMISSED AND UNDERMINED

DISAPPOINTED

CONFUSED

SAD

UNCERTAIN

and not the sexy-new-idea-stimulating kind of uncertain

Because, frankly, conferences can be really

FUCKING

BORING

Because, despite all this — we still like people and ideas

And academics just complaining about academic conference is a bit of a circle-jerk

Because we are

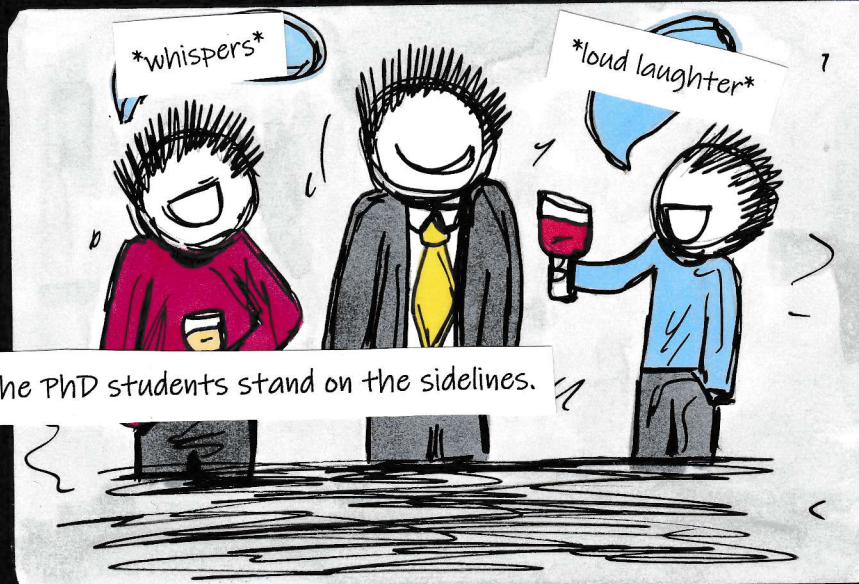
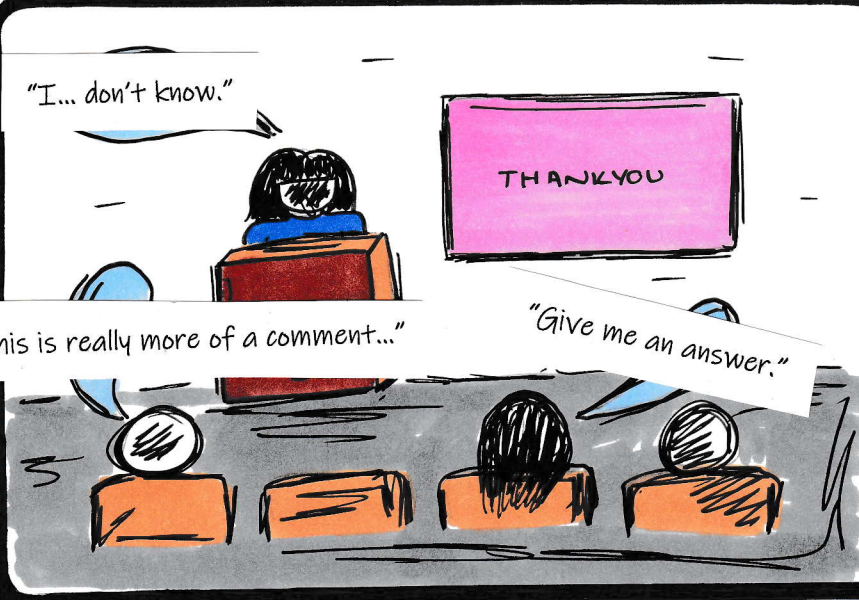
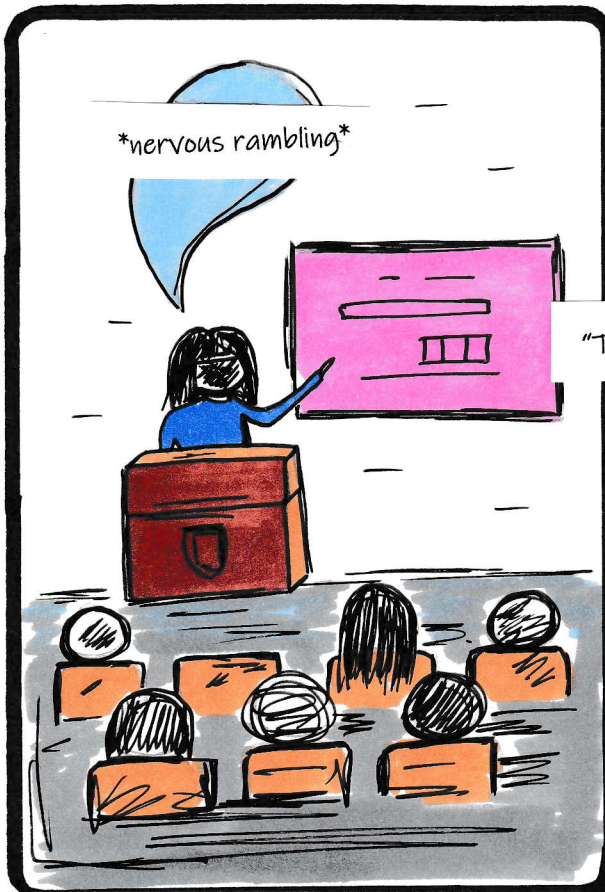
SMART

FUN &

COOL

ENOUGH

to do something different



Meanwhile at the conference drinks, the PhD students stand on the sidelines.



The traditional conference

Conference Bingo

Take this sheet along to your next traditional conference...

dick swinging
thinly veiled as
passive-aggression

senior academic
who only attends
conference drinks

breaks getting
cancelled/shortened
because of speakers
going overtime

gluten-free lunch
option is a **salad**

senior academic asks
PhD student
presenter when the
conference food
arrives

vegan conference
dinner option is a
salad

more than **two**
people show up to
last session

speaker
disrespectfully
cutting into other
speakers' time by
going overtime

someone's "**more of
a comment than a
question...**"
lasts longer than the
presentation itself

name-drops
theorist they
clearly have not
read

vegetarian lunch
option is a **salad**

junior researcher who
did the work isn't at
the conference, but is
generously mentioned
in a footnote

vegan dessert option
is a **fruit salad**

conference is held in
a beautiful city
(but it's actually **an**
hour away from
the windowless
university room
you're stuck in)

chair of the panel
acting **like they are**
speaking on the
panel

makes a comment
during "**small**
talk" which would
be a clear HR
violation

so much text on a
slide it could be a
whole article

gluten-free dessert
option is a **fruit**
salad

less of a micro, and
more like a **macro-**
aggression

having your **seventh**
coffee of the day

Tasked with organising a conference for postgraduate researchers, we asked ourselves

What do we actually get out of academic conferences?

What are we there for?

Making friends

To be inspired

Forming networks

To learn

Connecting with others

Going to the pub after the presentations!

The best parts?

NOT the conference itself.

THINKING ABOUT

COVID-19

lost opportunities

isolation

exclusion

inequalities

so many online conferences

Be accessible!

Be fun!

IT NEEDED TO

Support co-creation.

Prioritise connection with others!

Designing a

**FUCK THE
ACADEMIC SYSTEM**

not-a-conference conference.



Three organisers took one session each

Each session needed to fit together

Creating space for future imagination

Funding for the travel and accommodation of all participants

Abstracts: not an individual paper, but an **ambiguity** or **conundrum** in your research.

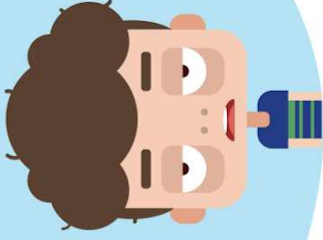
- Ambiguity around locating literature or theoretical frameworks;
- Ambiguity regarding a specific literature, methodology, or theoretical framework;
- Ambiguity around how to articulate a position;
- Ambiguity around how to connect positions in an argument;
- Concerns around data collection and analysis;
- An ethical conundrum regarding the use of chosen approach; methodological approach;
- A conundrum about how to clearly articulate a position to avoid misinterpretation;

DRESS
CODE

"Wear whatever the f*** you want!"



Going to a social event after a whole day of conferencing can be a little exhausting



THE SOCIAL EVENT

What was sent to participants:

I (Joy) always find conference social events tricky. On the one hand, my poor attention span appreciates the break from heavy academic discussions, and I love getting to connect with fellow attendees. But on the other hand, I feel like academic power dynamics are on steroids at conference social events; professors congregate with professors, PGRs with other PGRs, and we often fall into disorientating name-dropping conversations that feel like verbalised intertext referencing. I must admit I usually just nod even if I haven't heard of the referenced academic to avoid the shocked reaction when I confess my ignorance (and then they provide a description of the academic as 'A professor at x university' ...which is not very helpful anyway?)

So is the social event designed around my ignorance of academics I *should* know? ...maybe, but we also think that it could help set the scene for the rest of the event where we are collectively trying to break habitual ways of gathering as academics.

Here is what you need to know about the social event:

- It will be held from [redacted] if you are planning on joining please make sure you arrive by [redacted] when we will start the social activity
- Bring an item that captures who you are beyond your research/academic life
- There will be a strict 'no talking about your work (or the work of others)' rule. It feels a bit authoritarian to ban talk about research, academic literature, or even your institution... but we promise you will get plenty of chances to discuss this the following day! I guess we are just trying to facilitate encountering each other as humans first.



Maybe one of the reasons academic conferences can feel

Alienating - Intimidating - Unsupportive

is because we often walk into the first day not knowing anyone (or at least only knowing a few people). We start the day in a room of mostly strangers and the implicit assumption is that we will get to know each other by striking up conversations during the breaks.

☆ Key Takeaway ☆

We held the social event the night before the workshop

Holding the social BEFORE the actual event was a key success. People were able to meet each other prior to the 'serious' activities and had the time to present themselves (and encounter one another) as whole humans. We really think that meeting prior to the workshop helped to facilitate connection and make the following day a little less intimidating.

WHAT DID WE DO

THE NIGHT OF THE EVENT

1

People introduced themselves in pairs using the item they brought

2

Joined with another pair to form groups of 4. Each person's original partner introduced them and the item they brought to the rest of the group

three

Formed larger groups of 6-8 and had each person introduce another member of their group

★ Key Takeaway ★

Why are social events always organised around drinking? Surely there are more inclusive (and less expensive) ways to get people chatting together?



the 'no talking about work' rule allowed people to bring their whole self.

Part of why academia can feel so alienating is that it doesn't always make space for the whole of ourselves. The rule allowed us to meet each other as whole people. It also helped doing this in small groups - in fact, at one point there was the suggestion that we introduce ourselves to the whole group of 20, but we immediately felt that doing this would get in the way of the genuine interactions we were able to have in pairs/groups of 2-8

SOME ITEMS
PEOPLE BROUGHT

A card game because they love playing board games/ card games (and can be a little competitive)



A photocopy of their two passports to reflect their dual citizenship and multifaceted identity



A set of nesting dolls that their child made for them where each doll reflects a member of their family (and their multi-layered interests)

Struggle Street Parties

occupying space and letting others do the same

round table conversations on ambiguity

info we sent to participants



solidarity

safety and community

As mentioned in the event descriptor, the struggle street exercise is designed to disrupt some of the conventional assumptions and practices of standard conference presentations. We wanted to move away from the performative, defensive and non-interactive nature of traditional paper panels. A desire to create a more open, vulnerable space underpinned our request for applicants to submit a research ambiguity for discussion. Interestingly, we found many applications read like traditional conference paper abstracts – this communicated to us that we needed to be even more disruptive to break habituated practices.

In response, we decided to group participants by ambiguities we could see peeking through the abstracts. The exercise itself will focus on drawing out the contours of the assigned ambiguity – how the tension resonates in your group, defining the specifics of the competing considerations, even the emotions that accompany occupying that space of uncertainty. Importantly, unlike traditional spaces where you are expected to present an answer or solution, the point of the exercise will be to stay and map out this space of ambiguity.

embracing discomfort and vulnerability

listening

the unknown

using soft toys for fun

relating to one another

not having the answers!

Here is what you need to know about the struggle street parties:

- Before the event, identify something in another participant's abstract that resonates with you.
- You will be given five minutes to speak to how your ambiguity relates to the theme, and the aspect of someone else's ambiguity that resonated with you (they don't need to be connected).
- To facilitate active listening, this activity will take the form of a talking circle and participants will speak only when they are holding the talking piece.
- Time keeping will be strict! This is to keep the discussion equitable and moving along (but don't worry, the groups are small and the speaking time short, so the talking piece will come back to you in no time).
- The aim is to define the contours of the ambiguity; resist the urge to present solutions and be prepared to embrace a degree of discomfort.

Key Takeaways

TALKING CIRCLES IN THEMATIC GROUPS

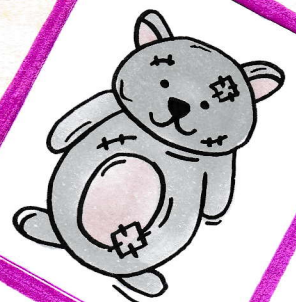
WE HAD
NOTE-TAKERS

Fostering discussion
which doesn't
happen with
individual papers

Participants could
fully engage!

TALKING PIECE

Giving everyone
time and space
to be heard



we need to go beyond identifying the problem and start imagining an alternative

Connects to the social event

we come back full full circle to who we are 'outside' academia

Creates a breather and the opportunity for some people to get up and move about



Objects help to mediate the intensity of directly relating to and interacting with someone



we need to go beyond identifying the problem and start imagining an alternative

Sharing What Could Be

The past few years have highlighted the importance of connection in our day to day lives. Online spaces have allowed us to do so many things and have made many places accessible - but there is something to be said for the tactility of *being* and *doing* together. Driven by our desire for academia to be less individualistic and for knowledge creation to be collaborative, we wanted to introduce an aspect to our event that involved working together beyond the conceptual plain.

In the same groups set up earlier, participants will work together to create a physical tool kit to present to the other two groups. This tool kit draws on the ambiguities explored earlier and the items and/or examples participants will have brought with them of where they felt vulnerability and/or ambiguity was supported in their life. This is a tool kit of what's needed to feel safe, to hold space for the ambiguities, difficult questions and research struggles established earlier.

this allows us to tie the ends and means together and actually have the experience of how to hold this space

especially good at the end of the day

protecting a sense and image of 'professionalism' is such a barrier to change

making together creates new non-verbal vulnerabilities

but it was hard for people to actually take the first step and make



KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- ↳ making together at first
- ↳ making with as output (e.g., posters)
- ↳ making in new groups would be better
- ↳ making with as output (e.g., posters)
- ↳ making together at first
- ↳ making in new groups would be better

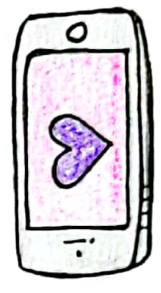
it is good to give people some grounding in advance to also help get their minds thinking that way

Here is what you need to know about the struggle street parties:

- Bring at least one prompt/example of incidents, spaces or contexts—academic or otherwise—where vulnerability and ambiguity was/are supported. These might include a fictional example you'd be happy to show a clip of on your phone, a flyer from an event or perhaps conversation with a friend you'd be happy to verbally recount. Please bring as many prompts in whatever medium works best for you and they can be as profound or banal as you like!
- Together your group will discuss, depict and organise these mixed materials onto a poster—a physical and material process of holding together multiple realities.
- Paper and other creative materials will be provided, but also feel free to bring any creative tools you desire.

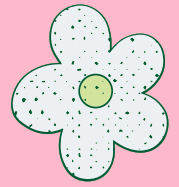
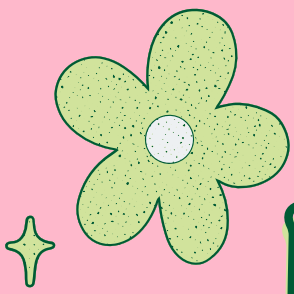
please can we have a break from all the earnestness!

we encouraged people to take photos of the posters to share with other people and for their personal toolkits



making cross-contextual connections is critical! it is important to locate academia within the wider world instead of only setting it up as unique and separate! we need to resist an 'us vs. them' mode of thinking

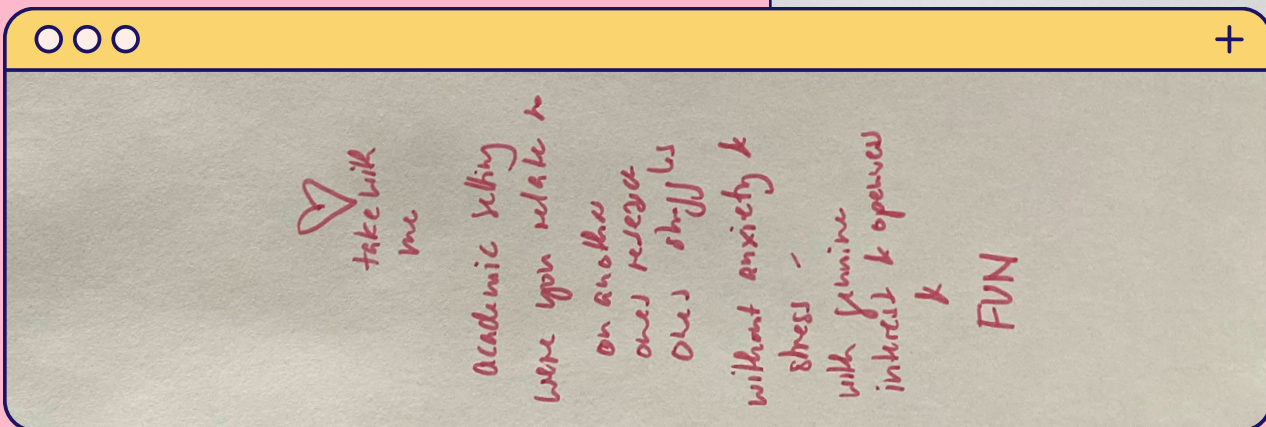
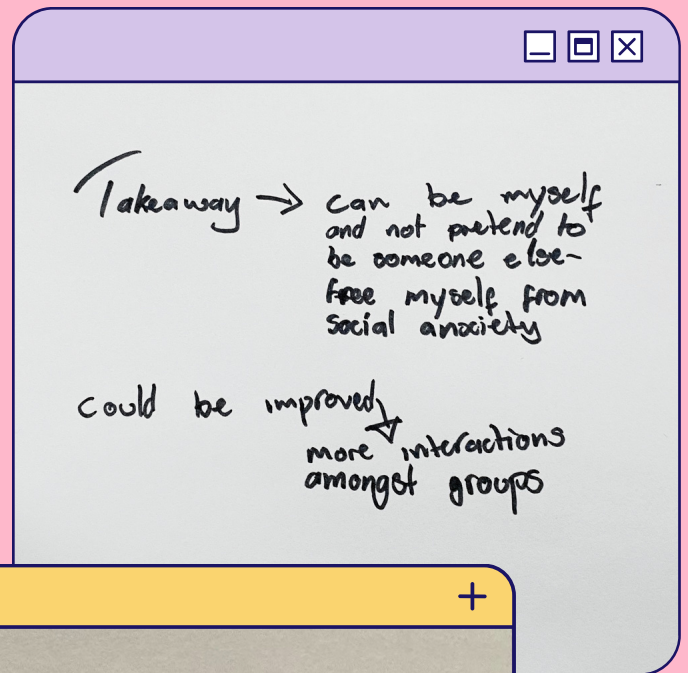
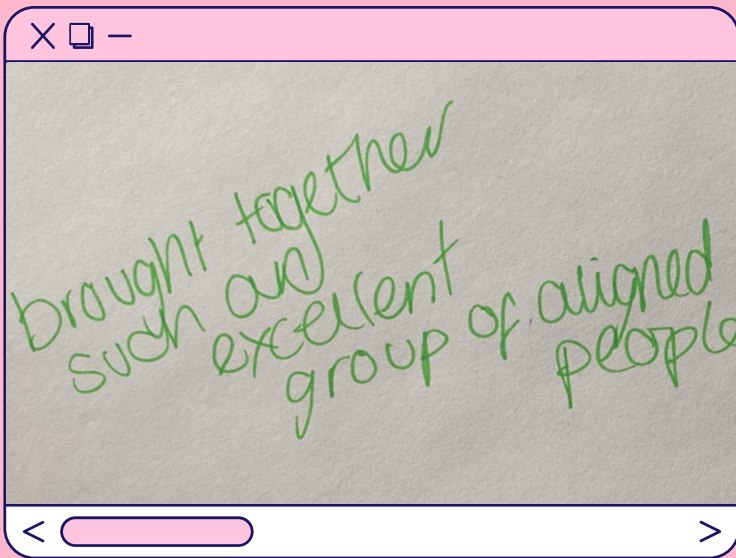
thinking of bell hooks here and the need for recognising the influence of ideas beyond those typically called 'theory' and found in academic texts



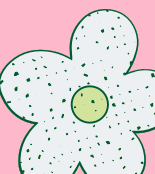
Feedback



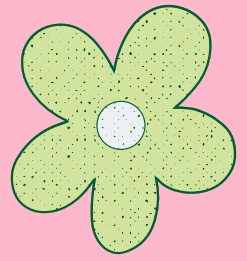
People liked that there were opportunities to genuinely engage with each other - even saying they wished there was more time to interact with the other groups



There was a general sense that attendees could be themselves and embrace the vulnerability and ambiguity that comes with bringing one's whole self to interactions



In fact, as organisers, we really could have done more to set up the event to make the most of these genuine engagements and spaces of vulnerability.

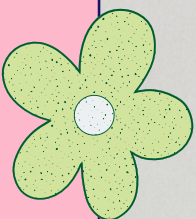


I want to take away creativity, mutual stuff, discussions around "ambiguous" rather than "paper" papers.

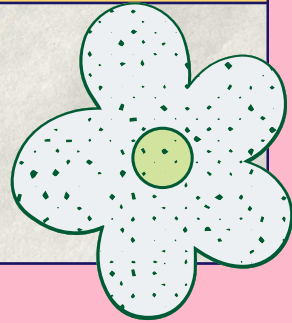


I want to take away the ability to be open and vulnerable in academic contexts and for it to be encouraged. I want to embrace the blurred lines between personal and professional

could be "improved" this would be so great as more than one day
I know that a funding issue but I am just imagining several days were
it is more about general / interdisciplinary conversations
2 another gives the chance to do the same sharing circles but with similar research & share & help each other think & struggle through each others work & relate to each other work



improve potential to go further w/ experimenting.
- More opps. to continue conversations w/ others
- longer (to create these opps!)



The authors want to thank:

Society of Legal Scholars for providing funding that allowed us to cover travel, accommodation (and if required, childcare) for the attendees

Gender and Law at Durham (GLAD) and Durham Centre for Academic Development (DCAD) for additional funding and support

Most of all we want to thank all the attendees whose enthusiastic participation in our experimental (anti)conference made it the wonderful day it was!



There is a real hunger for different ways of coming together. Trying alternatives out can be awkward as hell, but our very feelings of discomfort and ruptures in familiarity actually point us towards to new horizons.



We feel that the Thursday evening social - with its holistic focus and interactional style - set us up well for a Friday of sharing struggles and envisaging futures in our small groups. Many of us felt able to try out ideas and attitudes we'd be unable to do so easily and so quickly elsewhere. However, a further day, activity or event might have been a productive follow-on. It would meet peoples' requests for more inter-group interaction and more time together overall. It could help us move beyond Friday's general sense of catharsis and solidarity, and into the specifics of our research topics and their onto-epistemologies of gender and the wider world. This does not have to mean a space free from formality or challenge - things we associate with traditional conferences - now that we have built a dialogue between people supported and accountable enough to each other to play a meaningful part in the vulnerable process of knowledge production.

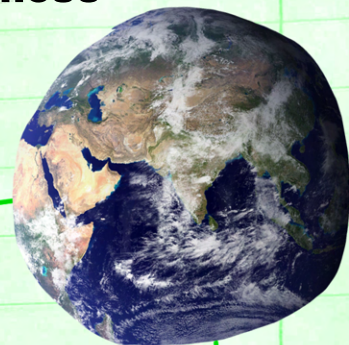
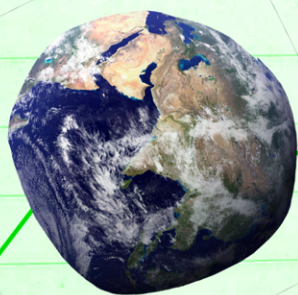
Lessons



learnt

And, speaking of dialogue, many of our conversations focused on how 'voice' has been denied us in our work and wider lives. Sharing this created such a sense of catharsis and recognition of the importance of our work. So many of our conversations covered the problem of 'us' and 'them', with the 'us' becoming the 'them' of academia to better bring the 'them' down from the inside. However, it would also be interesting for us to set up the event space more to support the listening and accountability that voice requires - especially to move beyond reproducing an ideal individualised voice removed from its environment.

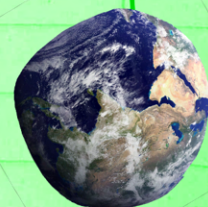
As a focus on this hyper-individualized voice is a problem of polemic debates on gender more generally, we'd love to explore how we can challenge it within our own research and thinking. In practical terms then, maybe we could have further formalised the listening processes throughout the day. Perhaps through requiring new groups to be formed after the first activity and be based around listening to what each group had previously addressed and the specific environments that inform those dilemmas?

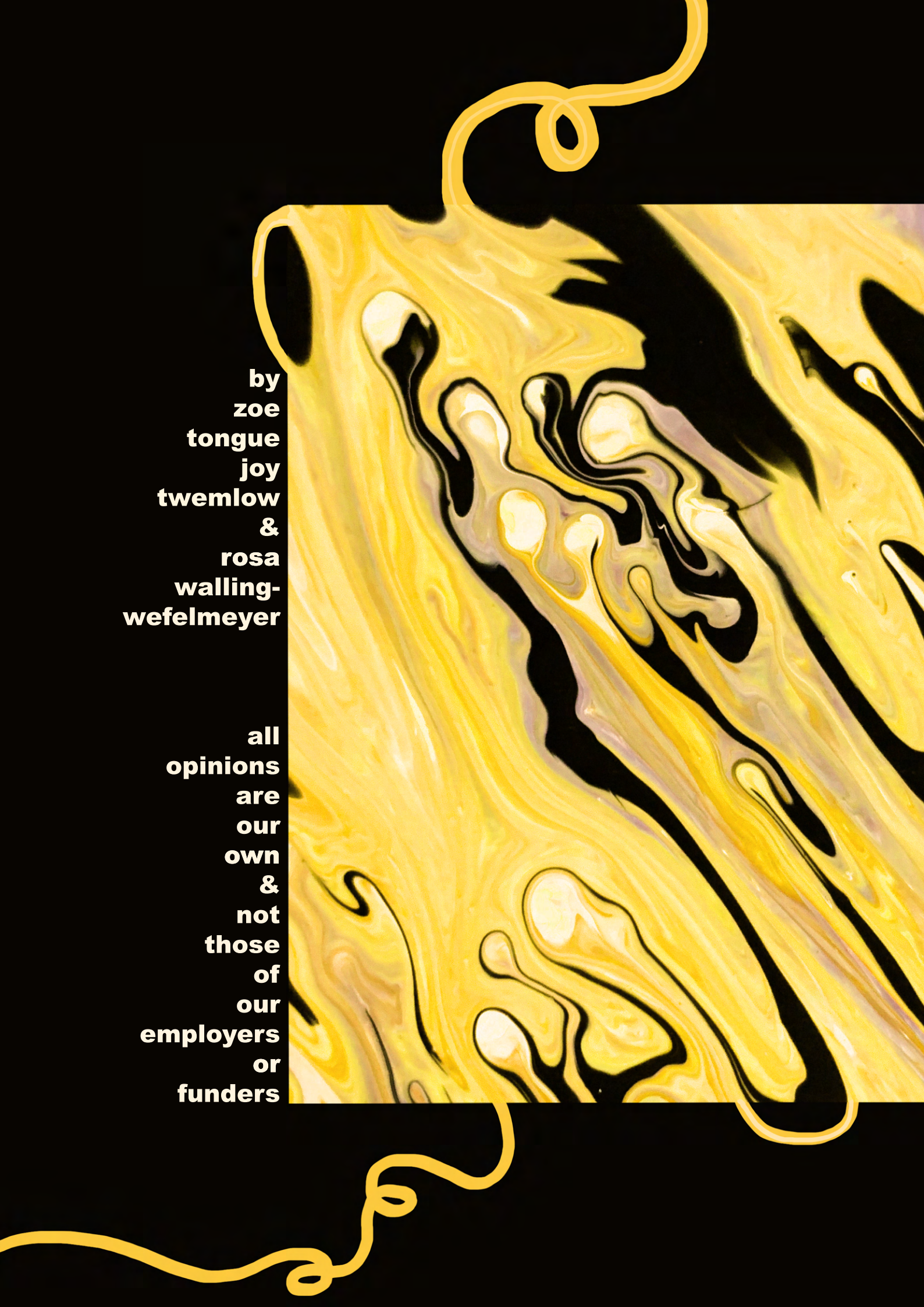


Similarly, paying attention to the practicalities of research - how we all actually 'do' research in a daily sense - might help us to forge new connections and ideas. It might help us to interrogate our own implicit and gendered prioritizations of positivism, empiricism and of academia as separate from but platforming the 'real world'.

We felt these ideas could become barriers to achieving meaningful inter-disciplinary dialogue on gender (particularly between the social sciences, and the arts and humanities) - with the former too easily felt to be writing the world as it is and the other (merely) theorising and creating representations of it.

Attention to the daily 'doing' of research on gender might prove an opportunity for more solidarity and interdisciplinary thinking, showing us how we make the our world through researching it.





**by
zoe
tongue
joy
twemlow
&
rosa
walling-
wefelmeyer**

**all
opinions
are
our
own
&
not
those
of
our
employers
or
funders**